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ABSTRACT

Although a sustained campaign has been underway to preserve published materials of importance to scholarly research in the United States, there has not been a similar impetus for the preservation of unpublished materials and the kinds of collections held by archives. A systematic methodology for developing preservation priorities for archival materials at institutional, interinstitutional, and national levels is needed. The conceptual issues involved in the development of this expanded concept of preservation include the range of media covered, the information explosion, and the concepts of preservation, life expectancy, and enduring value. The following basic principles are offered by the Task Forces on Archival Selection reporting to the Commission on Preservation and Access: (1) establishment of a responsible archival management program; (2) the fundamental importance of environment, housing, and ongoing maintenance; (3) recognizing the universe of documentation; and (4) integration of information and responsibility. Recommendations are made to policymakers to increase allocations for preservation and to the profession to foster initiatives for preservation. A background sheet provides information on the Task Forces on Archival Selection. (SLD)

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ED 360 969

The Commission on Preservation and Access

THE PRESERVATION OF ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

A REPORT OF THE TASK FORCES ON ARCHIVAL SELECTION TO THE COMMISSION ON PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

April 1993

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Task Force Preface

The Task Forces on Archival Selection are pleased to present this report to the Commission on Preservation and Access. The Commission supported the work of the task forces to identify and consider key issues related to the preservation of archival materials. Further support was provided by The Research Fellowship Program for Study of Modern Archives at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, which funded a four and a half day meeting to review and expand upon the work.

The final report represents the views of a broad spectrum of archivists. It is not, however, intended to be a final statement on any of the issues covered. Rather, it is hoped that it will stimulate both general discussion of the issues raised and application of the recommendations. A decision model for assigning preservation priorities developed by the task forces is being field tested by the Research Libraries Group (RLG), Inc., Mountain View, CA. After completion of the field test, the results will be made widely available by RLG.

Although a sustained and comprehensive effort has been underway in the United States for the past decade to preserve published materials of importance to scholarly research, a similar campaign has not yet been launched to ensure that a significant portion of the archival record will also be accessible for use in the future. The Scholarly Advisory Committee on History convened by the Commission on Preservation and Access has been particularly concerned about the survival of such materials. At its second meeting in April 1991, the committee agreed that greater attention should be paid to developing methods of selection for preservation, with particular attention to the kinds of collections held by archives. As Larry Hackman, Archivist of the State of New York, stated in a working draft prepared for the committee in May 1991:

In contrast to published information, no similar initiatives have been taken to select and preserve systematically even the most important unique archives and manuscripts nationwide. . . . A review of Federal preservation grants, for example, suggests the absence of priority or pattern and offers little assurance that the most important collections are being preserved. Decisions appear to be made without any formal or commonly accepted framework for assessing their intrinsic value, the importance of the information they contain relative to information in other records or collections, and their physical condition and the costs of preservation.

In other words, a systematic methodology for developing preservation priorities for archival materials at institutional, inter-institutional and national levels is needed.

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In accepting their charges, the task forces recognized the broad and diffuse nature of their undertaking.[1] Archival preservation encompasses not only individual repository actions but cooperative efforts as well. To work in this larger arena, a variety of participants will need to assume responsibility for program development on multiple levels. Such an approach requires a common conceptual framework. To help develop that framework, this report presents a statement of basic principles that provide a focus for action and a set of recommendations.

Although the report does not deal directly with electronic and hybrid systems, it does examine the archival management of paper-based systems with an eye to developing a methodology to encompass newer technologies and media as we move into the 21st century. To that end, preservation elements are outlined within a framework of responsible collecting and custody that begins even before the materials are acquired by the repository. Repositories are encouraged to adopt a broadened view of preservation management as maintaining the usability of their collections as a whole for as long as possible.

Such an expanded concept of preservation moves beyond a focus on materials that reside in individual repositories, beyond the limits traditionally imposed by the physical format or medium within which the information resides, and beyond a reliance on microfilming or conservation treatment as the only solutions. It also assumes that not all of the holdings of any one archive can be expected to survive forever either as artifacts or as information reincarnated in a new format.

The report is addressed to several audiences: archivists; preservation professionals; those responsible for the administration and support of archives, including their physical facilities; professional organizations; users of archives; networks and consortia; and governmental and private funding agencies and other resource allocators.

Finally, the report is intended to be provocative in the hope that it will stimulate debate and a reexamination of accepted views. In short, the report should be viewed as the beginning of a process to make preservation a more integral part of archival practice.

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CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

The Range of Media Covered

At the outset, both task forces focused primarily on the preservation of retrospective, paper-based collections. In the course of their work it became clear that portions of the discussions would be applicable to collections of photographs, moving images, and, to a lesser extent, video and sound recordings on magnetic tape.

The decision model is less appropriate to electronic records, since it was written primarily in terms of the physical characteristics of paper and secondarily of film. Archival records on magnetic media, as well as video and audio tape, certainly require special environmental controls and housings due to their physical instability. However, the continual obsolescence of commercial tape formats and playback machinery is equally an impediment to long-term preservation with these media. In addition, selection decisions for the preservation of electronic records, including when, where, and how to maintain the preserved information, are best made before the records are created. Indeed, because of the rapid proliferation of new technologies for the capture and retrieval of information, the permanent retention of information residing in these inherently unstable formats will require

[1] See Background, last page.

archival intervention in decisions regarding the very creation of those records. Nonetheless, decisions concerning what is important to maintain are the same because they are based on appraisal criteria.

The Information Explosion

During the past quarter century, advances in information technology have made it possible to create records in quantities that stagger the imagination. For example, in 1989 the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History reported that "the federal government now produces every four months a stack of records equal to all those produced in the 124 years between George Washington and Woodrow Wilson."[2] At the same time scholarly research has expanded in both breadth and depth, resulting in the emergence of whole new subfields and increased interdisciplinary research efforts. Because of the increased ease with which data can be manipulated and analyzed, it is now possible to argue potential research value for virtually any collection or even for a single document. As a result, archivists now face not only an exponential physical growth in the volume of collections and a rapid proliferation of new media but also an explosion in the definition of what constitutes meaningful information. This has made it increasingly difficult to select information of enduring value for any particular topic and to decide preservation priorities for those records that are in archival custody.

The Concepts of Preservation, Life Expectancy, and Enduring Value

Difficulty in discussing preservation issues arises because the term itself has had several diverse meanings in archival usage. This lack of a common and specific understanding of the meaning of ***preservation*** for archives has impeded systematic planning. In a recent article, James O'Toole explored the changing and varied meanings to archivists of both preservation and permanence. He noted that the idea of preserving records has at present three different meanings: identifying and acquiring the original documents; providing conservation treatment to deal with chemical and/or physical problems; and transferring the information to an alternative medium.[3]

A fourth meaning can be added: providing a level of environmental control, housing, care and maintenance that will retard further chemical deterioration and protect materials from physical damage. This meaning of preservation is what this report describes more fully as responsible custody.

And finally, preservation encompasses not only individual repository actions to assure the protection of existing holdings, but cooperative efforts to identify and preserve documentation beyond repository control.

Indeed, systematic preservation management entails planning early in the life cycle of collections. In many cases, archivists and preservation professionals can work actively with records creators to identify records with archival value prior to the time when they will be transferred to an archives. Records creators can be encouraged to keep such records on more stable media and to establish archivally sound storage, handling, and maintenance procedures. These actions will forestall the need for later repairs, treatments or reformatting.

O'Toole also pointed out that the "technical distinction between extending the so-called usable lifetime of documents (a more modest and realistic goal) and preserving them literally forever was often blurred."[4] The concept of usable lifetime or, preferably, ***life expectancy*** can be used to clarify different expectations about the ultimate survival of different collections by describing the anticipated longevity of the various media on which they are recorded. Life expectancy is determined both by the chemical and physical properties of the medium and by how it has been housed and handled.

Only when records are held in responsible custody — that limits the extent of physical damage and slows the rate of deterioration — will life expectancy reach full term. To extend life expectancy beyond a medium's natural limit, conservation treatment, such as chemical and structural stabilization to contain or reverse the effects of chemical deterioration and/or mechanical damage, must be applied. Another option is to preserve the information contained in the documentation by transferring it to another medium, such as microform. Recognition of the limitations imposed by life expectancy is a constant factor in archival management.

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[2] Page Putnam Miller, *Developing a Premier National Institution: A Report from the User Community to the National Archives*, Washington, D.C., National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, 1989.

[3] James O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *The American Archivist* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 11-25.

[4] *op. cit.*

If preservation is understood to comprise a series of actions to prolong the life expectancy of archival materials, as outlined above, it is necessary to rethink the concept of ***enduring value***. The premise that all materials accessioned by a repository are of enduring value is fundamental to archival practice. There is, however, an inherent contradiction between the concept of enduring value as a description of intellectual content and the concept of life expectancy, which recognizes the limitations imposed by the physical medium.

Given the technical complexity and cost of conservation and the financial and organizational barriers to reformatting, only a fraction of the holdings of any given archive can be expected to receive either kind of treatment. Therefore, while repositories will continue to impose the standard of enduring value upon their acquisitions, such judgments need to be tempered by a recognition of the realities imposed by the lfe expectancies of various physical formats. This report is intended to help define and clarify these distinctions.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

The following principles were developed to provide a focus for action and identify the basis upon which a national consensus for preservation strategy can be structured. The principles assert the interdependence of preservation and all other aspects of archival management. Preservation cannot be considered in isolation and cannot be removed from custodial responsibility without risk. At issue is both the viability of the current record and the quality of documentation for American society.

A Responsible Archival Management Program

Preservation is an integral component of overall archival management and must be blended into an archive's mission, policies, and programs. A responsible archival management program is founded on a realistic and clearly stated concept of institutional mission and bases its decisions on a well-defined acquisition policy. Such a program accepts responsibility for active management of the preservation of its collections, including using clearly defined criteria to set priorities among its collections.

The Fundamental Importance of Environment, Housing and Ongoing Maintenance

Appropriate environmental and housing conditions and a program of ongoing maintenance, i.e., responsible custody, are the most important and critical measures that can be taken to prolong the life of archival collections. The life expectancy of archival material is directly affected by the conditions under which it is produced, stored, used and maintained. The most cost-effective long-term application of an institution's resources is to invest in environmental controls, appropriate equipment and supplies, and ongoing programs to monitor and refresh or reformat information on unstable media in order to ensure its continuing availability. The concept of responsible custody implies that, when repositories cannot provide these basic conditions, they consider other options, such as transfer to a repository that will provide responsible custody for information of long-term value.

The Universe of Documentation

Selection for preservation encompasses a series of decisions starting with the choice of materials to be taken into archival custody. The materials currently housed in repositories are but a small portion of the available documentation. Archivists have come to recognize that modern society is unevenly and poorly documented. Cooperative analysis and planning are required to assure that adequate and appropriate documentation is identified, selected and placed under appropriate care, either in the hands of the records creators or at an archival repository. Nor can the physical preservation or reformatting of archival records be left to chance. Careful planning and selection are therefore also needed so that the limited resources available for active preservation measures are expended to insure that a broad representation of the universe of documentation remains viable into the future.

The Integration of Information and Responsibility

Modern society is documented in published and unpublished records, visual, aural and artifactual sources. Researchers use these forms of evidence in an integrated fashion, but curators often collect, describe and provide access to each format separately. Decisions about collections — appraisal, description, preservation — require a knowledge of the relationship of one form of evidence to another. Thus, the appraisal of archival records is based on knowledge of the related documentation in all formats. All cura-

tors — librarians, archivists and museum staff — must work together to coordinate the full range of decisions about collections so that information is preserved as an integrated whole rather than in isolated bits and pieces.

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

We recognize that preservation does not depend only on activity at the repository level. Real change is dependent on action on a number of fronts. These recommendations are therefore addressed to a variety of audiences, all of whom play an important role in the documentation of American society. Each group bears part of the responsibility to ensure the preservation of some portion of the universe of documentation. The goal of identifying and preserving all significant documentation can be achieved only through the cooperative efforts of archivists, other custodians of our cultural heritage, and the administrators and others who make decisions and allocate resources to carry out those tasks. The task forces have endeavored to delineate roles, define responsibilities and suggest some actions that will move us toward our goal.

Recommendations to Resource Allocators

Traditionally, institutional resource allocators and both government and private funding agencies have distinguished between published and unpublished materials in selecting preservation initiatives in libraries and archives for support. Rather than serving the broadest needs of the universe of the nation's documentation, this approach reinforces the continued fragmentation of information and the segmentation of custodial responsibility. The task forces therefore urge a realignment of funding categories so that they reflect more appropriately the needs of the total universe of documentation.

The intent of these recommendations is not to request increased funding to reduce the burden on individual repositories or administrators; rather, their purpose is to suggest a better use of scarce resources through a more balanced allocation of existing funds. Funding would therefore reflect the value of all information and result in more consistent policies and stronger and clearer requirements on repositories when they make a budget case, request an appropriation, or apply for grant funds.

To make a significant impact on the archival preservation problem nationwide, the task forces recommend that:

1. Funding and administrative priorities recognize the basic principles outlined in this document.

2. The work of federal funding agencies be coordinated more closely with one another.

3. Funds be made available for planning activities that address issues of identification and selection of significant information from the universe of documentation.

4. All submissions of requests for support of preservation activity be required to include repository acquisition policies, to stress the importance of responsible collecting.

5. Funds be made available for the improvement of environmental and housing systems in repositories, to promote responsible custody.

Recommendations to Professions

In order to combat the format-based approach traditionally used by libraries and archives, the task forces encourage members of the relevant professions, working both as individuals and through appropriate professional associations and organizations, to consider information in a broad and integrated context and to cooperate in the identification and preservation of our cultural heritage. To those ends, the task forces recommend that:

1. The implications of this document be reviewed, assessed and considered for each relevant profession in order to further the goals it articulates. For example, the Society of American Archivists (SAA), or the professional archival community, could develop guidelines for the creation of acceptable repository acquisition policies.

2. Prerequisites be developed for consortial projects that apply the basic principles outlined in this document. For example, national bibliographic databases could request a statement of acquisition policy from archival repositories whose holdings are included in the database.

3. Institutions be urged to develop cooperative strategies to preserve the complete documentary record.

4. The American Library Association and the Association of Research Libraries be encouraged to disseminate this document and draw their members' attention to the importance of its basic principles to the management and operations of libraries, particularly those that incorporate archives and special collections.

Recommendations for Projects and Future Actions

1. Documentation Projects to be Developed: It is recommended that projects be developed to identify and analyze segments of the documentation of modern society and plan for their appropriate preservation. Concepts such as documentation strategy — a plan to assure the adequate documentation of an ongoing issue, activity, function, or subject — may guide these efforts.[5] However, it will be important to incorporate consideration of physical preservation as well as of preservation of information content into planning and decision-making. One of the challenges will be to find agencies, organizations and individuals who can carry out these projects. Efforts to assess how preservation can be incorporated might start with existing documentation projects. For example, the continuing work of the Center for History of Physics on the documentation of modern physics or the documentation project conducted by the SAA Congressional Roundtable on the U.S. Congress might serve as initial case studies. New projects might be developed for areas such as dance and higher education where existing research and documentation efforts can provide a foundation for broader studies.

2. Information to be Gathered and Shared: To facilitate an interinstitutional approach to archives preservation, it is recommended that data from individual repositories about preservation be aggregated and shared at the national level. Data are already being gathered by various organizations for a number of different purposes.

Additional projects could:

- identify what preservation-related information can be collected, compiled and shared at the national level;
- assess the data already collected and the existing information-gathering processes and mechanisms for their applicability to this set of needs;
- assess the costs associated with the various processes for collecting information on preservation of various media;
- develop a new data-gathering instrument or revise an existing one;
- ensure that ongoing responsibility for gathering, aggregating and disseminating the results is lodged in an appropriate organization.
- refine the preservation field of cataloging formats so that preservation information can be recorded online for all types of media at the time collections are cataloged and so that consistent vocabulary is used.

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As noted in the preface, a decision model for assigning preservation priorities is being field tested by the Research Libraries Group (RLG), Inc., Mountain View, CA. After completion of the field test, RLG will make the results widely available. The decision model includes discussions of responsible collecting, responsible custody, and determining value.

[5] Documentation strategy is ordinarily designed, promoted and in part implemented by an ongoing mechanism involving archival documentation creators, records administrators, archivists, users, other experts, and beneficiaries and other interested parties. It is carried out through the mutual efforts of many institutions and individuals influencing the creation and management of records and the retention and archival accessioning of some of them. The strategy is regularly refined in response to changing conditions as reflected in available information, expertise, and opinions. Strategies may be developed at levels ranging from worldwide and nationwide to statewide and community-wide. From "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," by Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, *American Archivist*, Vol. 50, Winter 1987.

Background: The Task Forces on Archival Selection

It has been difficult to do national planning or even to evaluate the relative merit of individual projects to preserve archival materials because there are no objective measures by which to judge the strength of a collection or its priority for preservation. In July 1991, the Commission engaged consultant Margaret Child to manage a project that would develop a collaborative strategy for preservation of and access to archival, manuscript and photographic collections. Two task forces — one to examine appraisal theory and practice and one to examine documentation strategy — were formed.

The groups were charged to examine existing guidelines, theory and practice in order to determine their applicability to the selection of important collections for preservation. The first was asked to explore ways to encourage repositories to introduce preservation considerations into the appraisal process as well as to use appraisal criteria and procedures to make preservation decisions. The second was charged to consider whether some of the methodologies and activities of the documentation strategy concept could also be used to provide a useful framework for posing preservation questions and making selection decisions.

Each task force met three times. The discussions gradually expanded focus from selection *per se* to a comprehensive consideration of the full range of archival concepts and functions because all were seen as being related to preservation. The second part of the third meeting was a joint session to discuss the interrelationships between the reports produced by each task force. Despite some inevitable disjunctures, there was enough congruence to allow them to be merged into a single document.

An application was made to and an award received from the Research Fellowship Program for Study of Modern Archives at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, in order to allow systematic and intensive review of the work of the task forces by an advisory committee composed of leaders of the archival profession with an interest in preservation issues. The four and a half day seminar in July 1992 was attended by fifteen task force and advisory committee members. The discussions were extremely wide-ranging and resulted in major revisions of the report. Sections of the decision model survey developed by the appraisal task force were also revised or replaced. The final text is therefore the product of an extended evolutionary process and represents the combined views of a broad spectrum of opinion.

The Task Force on Appraisal was chaired by Robert Sink of the New York Public Library and composed of: Frank Boles, Central Michigan University; Paul Conway, Yale University Library; Edie Hedlin, Consultant; Sarah Wagner, National Archives and Records Administration; and Christine Ward, New York State Archives. The Task Force on Documentation Strategy was chaired by Timothy Ericson of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and composed of: Bruce Bruemmer, University of Minnesota; Richard Cox, University of Pittsburgh; and Karen Garlick, Smithsonian Institution. The Advisory Committee included: Larry Hackman, New York State Archives; Anne Kenney, Cornell University; James O'Toole, University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Helen Samuels, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Also in attendance at the Bentley meeting were: Nancy Elkington, Preservation Program Officer at the Research Libraries Group; and Evelyn Frangakis, Manager of the Society of American Archivists Preservation Management Training Program.

The Commission on Preservation and Access is a private, nonprofit organization acting on behalf of the nation's libraries, archives, and universities to develop and encourage collaborative strategies for preserving and providing access to the accumulated human record.

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